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EDITORIALS*

IMPORTANCE OF PERSONNEL IN METROPOLITAN HEALTH BOARDS AND OFFICERS

How San Francisco Recently Selected Its Health Officer.—In the August CALIFORNIA AND WESTERN MEDICINE (pages 319 and 328) comment was made on the manner in which the city of San Francisco had seen fit to go about the task of selecting a successor to its former well-known health officer, the late William C. Hassler. In the letter which was sent to CALIFORNIA AND WESTERN MEDICINE by the secretary of the Western Branch of the Public Health Association it was stated that Mayor Angelo Rossi

"almost immediately following Doctor Hassler's death, instructed the Board of Health by memorandum that political affiliations and party lines should be laid aside in seeking a successor to Doctor Hassler. . . .

"He suggested the appointment of an advisory committee, consisting of the deans of the University of California and Stanford Medical Schools, the president of the San Francisco County Medical Society, the chairman of the San Francisco Health Council, and others, to consult with the board in the selection of the best candidate. The above advisory committee, after careful study of the functions of a municipal health department and the qualifications presented by some ten candidates, unanimously recommended Doctor Geiger."

In commenting on the appointment of Dr. Jacob C. Geiger of the Hooper Foundation of

* Editorials on subjects of scientific and clinical interest, contributed by members of the California Medical Association, are printed in the Medicine Today column which follows.

Medical Research, the San Francisco *Chronicle* printed the following:

"In the selection of Doctor Geiger neither politics nor influence played any part. Guarding the health of our population is too serious a problem to admit of any criterion in the selection of a health officer other than outstanding and recognized ability in this highly specialized department of medical science."

* * *

The San Francisco Policy Was in Harmony With Modern Public Health Viewpoints.—Mention is again made of the above because the course pursued and the action taken in these matters, in striving to keep the San Francisco public health work and its health commissioner out of the domain of ordinary civil politics, is a policy which probably has the almost unanimous endorsement of members of the medical profession and also of all lay citizens who understand the significance and importance of public health work.

San Francisco, in proceeding as it did, acted wisely and in accordance with modern day concepts of public health standards; and for this action received the commendation of public health authorities from all parts of the United States. The example set was worthy of emulation, and one would naturally have expected that the action taken would have been taken to heart, in California at least.

* * *

A More Recent Vacancy in the Position of Health Officer of Los Angeles.—The opportunity to profit by the San Francisco example soon and unexpectedly presented itself in another California city, for before the month of October came to a close a vacancy occurred in the position of health officer of California's southern metropolis, Los Angeles.

The events leading up to that vacancy will not be here discussed, because there is no wish to become involved in an exposition of the respective personal merits of the former and present health officers of the city of Los Angeles. We are here concerned with basic and important principles having to do with the organization of state and local public health departments and their relation to the medical profession. Our comments are presented with such intent.

The Los Angeles city board of health, for several years past composed entirely of laymen, saw fit, through the action of a majority of its members at its meeting on October 27, to dismiss the then health officer, and to immediately appoint his successor.

Such procedure was certainly in strong contrast to the course which had been followed in San Francisco, as above outlined.

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Comments of a Lay Newspaper on the Method of Appointment.—Some editorial comments in the Los Angeles *Evening Express* would seem worthy of place here, because they represent a viewpoint to which the medical profession probably gives assent. Quotation follows:

" . . . When the opportunity was afforded, by discharge of Health Officer George Parrish, to secure

for the city a nonpolitical, trained, experienced, competent man to head the vitally important Department of Public Health, the board of health instead made another political appointment.

"In the eyes of a majority of the health board members the health of the city's 1,300,000 inhabitants is second to politics. . . ."

The Los Angeles County Medical Association, membership in which attests loyalty to the high principles of the medical profession, has suggested repeatedly to the health board the advantages and advisability of consulting with the United States Health Service or the Carnegie Institution, or both, before making the selection of a city health officer. These leaders in the profession have no favorite to promote. Their single interest is the public health, to place its safeguarding in competent hands. They would save this department from the bitterness of political contention which has prevailed almost uninterruptedly since the death seven years ago of the venerable Dr. L. M. Powers, whose administration of the health department for a quarter of a century gained him world-wide fame. . . ."

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A Letter From Dr. Granville MacGowan, Ex-President of the California Medical Association.

—In the correspondence column of this number of CALIFORNIA AND WESTERN MEDICINE is printed a letter from Dr. Granville MacGowan, a former president of the California Medical Association. In that letter attention is called to other phases of the new problems which have arisen in Los Angeles. Several other letters bearing on these issues are printed in the correspondence column, including one from Surgeon General Cumming of the U. S. Public Health Service. (See page 474.)

In his letter, Dr. MacGowan very properly calls attention to the undesirability of having as the executive health board of a metropolitan city a board composed entirely of laymen.

It probably would not be unfair inference to assume that a lay health board as now existent would consist of members appointed more because of previous activities in civil politics than because of special prior interest or training in public health work.

When the present set-up of a lay board came into being several years ago, the present editor of CALIFORNIA AND WESTERN MEDICINE called attention in these columns to the fact that such a mode of organization was not in accord with modern public health organization methods, and that it would be a matter of surprise if the plan did not lead to undesirable results. (See CALIFORNIA AND WESTERN MEDICINE of August, 1927, page 225.)

The prophecy there made has been abundantly fulfilled, as shown by the manner in which such a lay board went about the dismissal of one health officer and the immediate selection of a successor.

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What Can an "Advisory" Medical Board Do?

—It is true that the newly appointed health officer has nominated and secured the appointment by the lay board of a medical advisory committee of twelve well-known colleagues in Los Angeles, but does that really help matters to any extent? Such an advisory board, not having the executive authority—all of which is vested in the lay health

board—can at best be little more than a figurehead advisory body, with the possible additional disadvantage of "holding the sack," should serious mistakes be made by the lay executive body. A similar advisory board of twelve members, as noted in the editorial above referred to, was brought into existence in 1927 and functioned probably little or not at all.

* * *

A Rational Set-Up for a Health Board.—It would seem to the editor that the city of Los Angeles owes it to itself and to its citizens that its health board should be composed of citizens who, through past training and knowledge of health and sanitation matters, would be in position to act with somewhat expert judgment, as based in turn on previous knowledge of public health work.

Such a health board might well have in its membership, say, two physicians, one veterinary surgeon, one sanitary engineer, and one business man. With such a grouping, the health officer could turn to a health board containing members who had special knowledge of epidemic diseases, of food production and distribution, of sanitary problems, and of business economics, these being the special factors worthy of coördination if best results are to be secured. It could be taken for granted that a health board of such complexion would be one which would commend itself generally to citizens, provided the mayor appointed representative and outstanding men to the different positions, which he would probably do if professional, civic, and commercial bodies did their part in informing him of the necessity of a high class personnel.

We believe it may also be taken for granted that with a board composed as above outlined, in case a vacancy had occurred in the position of health officer, that the action recently taken would have been far more apt to have been modeled after that of San Francisco, rather than that which the present lay health board of Los Angeles saw fit to adopt in its summary October meeting proceedings.

* * *

The Medical Profession Cannot Avoid Its Responsibilities in These Public Health Matters.

—The terms of these lay members of the Los Angeles city board of health must expire one by one. Which naturally suggests the thought as to whether it would not be a worthy cause for the Los Angeles County Medical Association to espouse and begin and carry on a campaign of education in these important matters. Then, in due time, with representatives from civic and commercial bodies of the community, the Los Angeles County Medical Association could join with such organizations to acquaint the mayor and city council with the important principle that the health board should be made up of representative citizens somewhat as above outlined.

Has not the medical profession very special responsibilities in all this? Can it or has it a right to avoid those responsibilities?